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Late Roman Silver

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The Traprain Treasure in Context

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CHAPTER 22

Roman relations with southern Scandinavia in Late Antiquity

THOMAS GRANE

The beginning

The first real contacts between the Roman empire and southern Scandinavia began at the time of the *Germania* campaigns of Augustus and Tiberius. After the defeat of Quinctilius Varus in AD 9, the Romans adopted a policy of diplomacy towards Germanic chieftains in northern *Germania* in place of a more aggressive approach. The most striking evidence of these contacts is of course the well-known grave from Hoby on Lolland (illus 22.1). The nature of the grave goods indicates personal political contacts with a high-standing Roman official, possibly Caius Silius, the commander of the upper Rhine army.[1] This grave is an exception in the area, however. The majority of graves with Roman objects from the first half of the first century AD contained only a few silver and bronze vessels. The grave goods suggest that the region was subject to a single diplomatic campaign, in which the Romans established a number of friendly contacts, much as we are told by Augustus himself in his memoirs.[2] Graves containing Roman vessels are situated in coastal areas, accessible to a ship that was circumnavigating the Cimbrian peninsula (illus 22.2).[3] Interestingly, in seven out of a total of ten graves, one vessel is a bronze basin of Eggers type 92. This vessel type is closely related to the *Germania* campaigns through its presence in the Augustan camp at Haltern, which ceased to exist after the Roman withdrawal in AD 16.[4] There is also a concentration of such vessels in northern Germany. It may be argued that they all arrived as part of the same diplomatic effort.[5]

The nature of contact

Over the following four centuries, graves of the Germanic elite were furnished with Roman vessels of silver, bronze and glass, mostly of types related to feasting, giving this period of the Iron Age the prefix 'Roman'. However, it should be stressed that the presence of Roman vessels in a grave does not alone indicate elite status. That requires other forms of wealth as well. During the Roman Iron Age, the quality and range of vessel types vary; but, generally speaking, they consist of a limited number of containers for serving, sieving, ladling and drinking. The range of types of vessels and the contexts in which we find them suggests that the purpose and meaning of these vessels did not change during the Roman Iron Age. What did change were the regions in which the elite graves are found.[6]

What, then, was the nature of the contacts with the Romans? The picture given by the Roman imports reaching southern Scandinavia is one of a rather homogenous group.[7] Roughly speaking, there are three ways by which such items might have reached *Germania*. One is trade, a second is booty and the third is 'subsidies'. Reviewing these three ways, regular trade should be discarded. That would have created a much more diverse find spectrum with all sorts of different items, most of all *terra sigillata*, as can be seen in the regions close to the Roman frontier. Booty is the second possible explanation. However, would that not present a picture much similar to that of regular trade? Furthermore, it would imply that Germanic warrior bands entered the empire on a regular basis and redistributed the spoils. Little evidence supports such a notion.

The last possible explanation is 'subsidies'. In this connection 'subsidies' would cover all sorts of transactions of a military–political nature from diplomatic gifts to pay-offs. The idea that diplomatic relations could have existed between southern Scandinavia and the Roman empire has been rejected as ridiculous due to the lack of written sources and the distance between the empire and Scandinavia.[8] As has already been demonstrated, such a conclusion is very narrow-minded and has no support in the

Illustration 22.1
The elite grave from Hoby on Lolland, dated to the first half of the first century AD (photo The National Museum of Denmark/Lennart Larsen)

Illustration 22.2
Graves with Roman imports from period B1a (AD 1–40). Dots: Eggers 92. Outline: only one Roman vessel. Filled: two or three Roman vessels. Large star: Hoby with eight Roman vessels. Dotted line: possible route taken by a Roman naval expedition

archaeological remains. The fact is that we can observe a reaction, in the presence of Roman objects, whenever the Romans had major problems with Germanic tribes. That indicates that there was a need for reliable contacts with Germanic peoples living beyond the Romans' enemies who lived immediately next to the frontier. We see this after the Augustan campaigns, after the Batavian revolt, after the Marcomannic wars and after the crisis in the third century AD, as discussed below.[9]

Contact over the centuries

After the first half of the first century AD, when the rich graves were placed along the coast, the majority came to be located on the island of Funen. This is the period when we can observe the first changes in Iron Age society towards larger power formations. Until now, the evidence has suggested a society of small local chieftains, who were in control of their village or a limited area. Such local powers survived only for a generation or two.

At the turn of the first century AD, such phenomena as the Olger Dike, a 12km-long *limes*-like barrier in southern Jutland, constructed of 90,000 oak trunks, and the first larger weapons-offerings in Vimose on Funen, indicate that supra-regional powers were forming. Although this transformation is often seen as growing out of the troubles connected with the Marcomannic wars, it is much more likely that it was the transformation which caused the wars, rather than resulting from them.

From the end of the first century AD, Scandinavia experienced a boom in imports, unlike continental *Germania*, where the import level remained unchanged. This boom happened at a time when the Romans had just been fighting all Germanic tribes along the Rhine as a result of the Batavian revolt in AD 70.[10] It makes sense, therefore, that the Romans sought allies beyond the enemies immediately facing them. At this time,

Illustration 22.3
Map of the graves and hoards from the fourth century mentioned in the text

Illustration 22.4
Varpelev, Grave a. Gold jewellery. Snake's-head arm ring, finger rings, cloak pin, *aureus* of emperor Probus (AD 276–82) with loop (photo The National Museum of Denmark/Lennart Larsen)

diplomatic transactions with Germanic chieftains would have been a result of the foreign policy of the lower Rhine governor.

After the Marcomannic wars, we see a reaction once again. Prior to the wars, a dynasty had already been in the making on eastern Zealand, at Himlingøje.[11] The Himlingøje centre, the earliest of the power centres in the late Roman Iron Age in *Barbaricum*, had acquired direct contacts to the lower Rhine. The distribution pattern of Roman vessels in Scandinavia in the late second and third century AD suggests that this centre held a monopoly on the import of these vessels which lasted for 150 years or more.

From the end of the second century AD, the new centre of Gudme-Lundeborg on the south-eastern coast of Funen began to emerge. Numerous spectacular finds have been made at this central place and port of trade. The wealth is mostly represented by valuables like bullion and Hacksilber, and these finds have led to interpretation of the site as a royal seat. In the first centuries of its existence, however, Gudme-Lundeborg must be seen in relation to other spectacular finds on the island.

Late Antiquity

The term 'Late Antiquity' is not a description that is used in Danish archaeology, primarily because 'Antiquity' is normally associated with the classical world, of which prehistoric Denmark is not a part. However, when we are dealing with relations between the Roman empire and southern Scandinavia, I find it a highly suitable description for the period following the crisis in the late third century AD, in which we see Scandinavia's transition from the Roman Iron Age to the Migration Period. In the fourth century AD we see a change in the way that the elite expressed itself in society. Over about a hundred years there was a change from the use of magnificent funerals to the burial of valuables without regard to their 'artistic' value. As exponents of the first, two sites stand out, Varpelev on eastern Zealand and Årslev on Funen (illus 22.3).

The last of the elite graves

The last visible display of power in the east Zealand centre is found in a cemetery of the early to mid-fourth century AD near the village of Varpelev, a few kilometres from Himlingøje. The cemetery is most likely the burial place of a single Germanic chieftain and his household. Out of twenty-eight graves, two, belonging to a man (Grave a) and a woman (Grave α) were very richly furnished. These two graves both contained many of the symbols of power of the Himlingøje dynasty, such as snake's-head finger- and

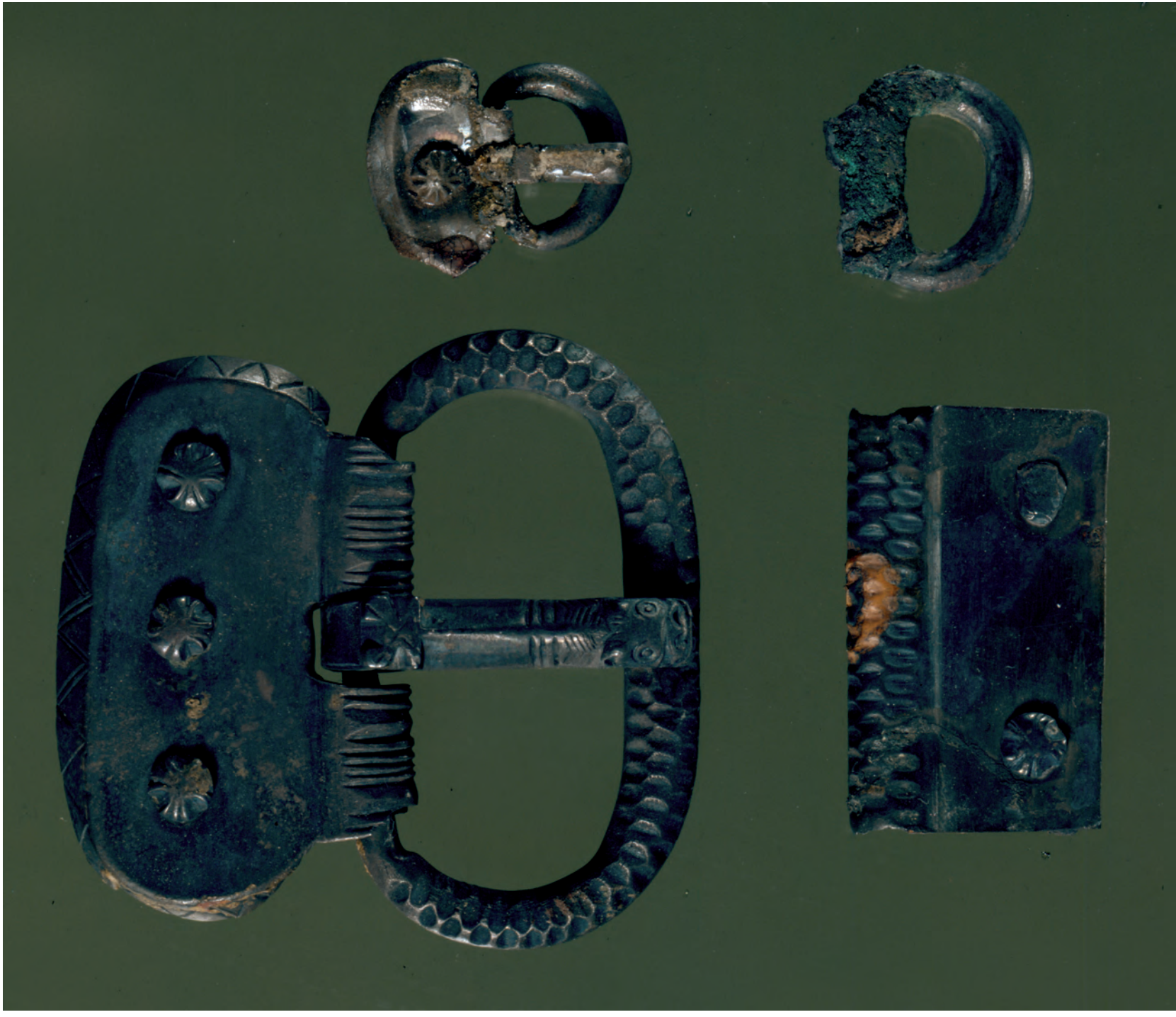

Illustration 22.5
Varpelev, Grave a. Silver belt buckles (photo The National Museum of Denmark/Lennart Larsen)

arm-rings and a swastika fibula, as well as Roman vessels (illus 22.4). Although these Roman vessels are superficially comparable to previous imports, several of them indicate a greater knowledge of Roman rituals and way of life than we see in evidence from the previous 150 years. The Varpelev 'prince' had also been equipped with a signal horn and a military belt with silver fittings of a type that was to become the traditional late Roman military belt type, linking him to the elite of the fourth and fifth century (illus 22.5).[12]

Whereas in its earlier years the eastern Zealand power centre had focused mainly on the western provinces and Cologne in particular, it can be seen to have turned now towards south-eastern Europe and the central and eastern provinces of the Roman empire. This conclusion is based on the origin of several of the grave gifts, as well as some of the anthropological remains. An examination of the bone material from the Varpelev cemetery showed that a number of the deceased had an origin in the south-eastern part of

Illustration 22.7
Årslev. Crystal ball with the Greek inscription ABΛAΘANAΛBA above an anchor. Diameter 30mm (photo The National Museum of Denmark/John Lee)

Illustration 22.8
Varpelev, Grave α and Årslev. Gold hair pins with pelta-shaped pendants (photo The National Museum of Denmark/John Lee)

central Europe.[13] The display of grave goods from Varpelev indicates knowledge of Roman rituals and suggests that the deceased were connected personally with parts of the empire, particularly the eastern Danube region, rather than having had a long-distance relationship.

The grave from Årslev on Funen from the fourth century also shows ties to both sides of the frontier in south-eastern Europe. Here, a woman was laid to rest with a magnificent set of lion's-head fittings, decorated with almandines and carnelians, and with a crystal ball with the Gnostic palindrome ABΛA[na]ΘANAΛBA (illus 22.6–7).[14] These are just some of the spectacular gifts pointing towards the Černjachov culture on one hand and east Roman Christian communities on the other. The grave had also been equipped with four Roman bronze vessels made in the western provinces and a silver spoon of the *ligula* type.[15]

Apart from an apparent orientation towards south-eastern Europe, the two sites have a few more solid elements in common. In the Årslev grave and Varpelev Grave α, gold hairpins were found that were each equipped with three gold chains with pelta-shaped pendants (illus 22.8). These are the only known examples. Furthermore, one of the bronze vessels from Årslev has a direct parallel in Varpelev Grave a. Whether these observations have any significance, further study will have to show. Varpelev and Årslev also show links to other less rich Danish graves, something that will not be explored further here.

An image emerges of a north Germanic elite who had close ties across the regions of modern Denmark, an elite which must have experienced at first hand some of the events that formed Europe in the fourth century AD. At some time during this century, however, the Germanic rituals and symbols of power appear to have changed. The custom of supplying the deceased with a wealth of luxury objects partly related to the banquet was vanishing. Typically, graves from period C3 (AD 310/20 – 375/400), the last period of the Roman Iron Age, rarely contained more than a single imported vessel.[16] Instead we see the beginning of a new custom of hoarding.

Illustration 22.6
Årslev. Gold lions' heads with pendants adorned with carnelians and almandines (photo The National Museum of Denmark/Lennart Larsen)

Treasures and hoards

In the 1860s, two gold hoards first appeared at Brangstrup and Boltinggård Skov, only 700m apart and less than 10km from the Årslev grave (illus 22.3). Excavations were carried out in 1991 and 2004

Illustration 22.9
The Brangstrup hoard (photo The National Museum of Denmark/Anne Vibeke Leth)

respectively. The Brangstrup hoard contained twenty-eight *aurei*, twenty-two *solidi* and gold jewellery in the form of pelta- and leaf-shaped pendants, as well as ring-shaped bars (illus 22.9).[17] The Boltinggård Skov hoard contained three *aurei*, twelve *solidi*, a neck-ring and half a kolben arm-ring (illus 22.10).[18] In both hoards the oldest coin is of Trajan Decius (AD 249–51) and the latest is a Constantinian coin of AD 335/36. In fact, five of the twelve *solidi* from Boltinggård are of that year. The pendants from Brangstrup originated in south-east Europe, probably in the Černjachov culture, as did, for instance, the lions' heads from the Årslev grave.[19] The wear on the coins in the two hoards suggests that the Boltinggård Skov hoard was placed in the ground quite soon after it was formed, as the latest coins are in mint condition, while the latest coins in the Brangstrup hoard are more worn, and for that reason the hoard is thought to have been buried somewhat later. The coins come from all over the empire; but the distribution pattern suggests that the Boltinggård hoard was put together in the western provinces, while the Brangstrup hoard was put together in the eastern provinces.[20]

In the following centuries, Funen and Gudme in particular came to dominate the archaeological landscape. An investigation based on the weight of gold jewellery, bullion and cut pieces reached the conclusion that in the Germanic Iron Age, on Funen in particular, there may have been an official weight system.[21] Gudme appears to have been the primary entry point for gold in this period. Gold hoards appear also, however, on the peninsula of Stevns in the periods after the last elite graves, and, although Funen at this time displays a larger number and richer hoards, there is nevertheless a concentration of such hoards on eastern Zealand (illus 22.11). The large silver hoard from Høstentorp, for example, is only 17km from Varpelev.[22]

The origin of and reason for the presence of the silver and gold found in Denmark cannot be investigated here in detail; but I shall make a few points. In the Roman Iron Age precious metals could only come from one place, the empire. As I have mentioned above, I consider that contacts between the empire and southern Scandinavia were primarily made for military–political reasons. We get a glimpse,

Illustration 22.10
The Boltinggård Skov hoard (photo The National Museum of Denmark/John Lee)

in the late third-century writings of the Athenian, Dexippos, of the fact that payments by the Romans to the Germans must primarily have been gold and silver. In a peace conference in AD 270 between the Emperor Aurelian and the *Iuthungi*, the *Germani* referred to an earlier treaty by which they had been paid in gold and silver for an alliance with the Romans.[23] Consequently, I believe that the many bronze and glass vessels were a by-product of these contacts rather than actual payment.

The Hacksilber finds, on the other hand, which have often been considered as redistributed booty from Germanic raids in the third century, could also have been part of a payment at a time when not enough coins were available. One example in support of this idea is the piece of a kolben arm-ring from the Boltinggård Skov hoard. From the beginning of the third century AD, kolben arm-rings were Germanic royal insignia. What makes the Boltinggård fragment special is that it has a punched inscription, reading

P-III (illus 22.12). The closest parallel is found in the treasure from Kaiseraugst, where three silver bar-shaped ingots each have similar punched inscriptions reading PIII, together with stamps of Magnentius (AD 350–3).[24] Two of these ingots weigh three Roman pounds, and the owner must have removed a pound of silver from the other, which weighs two Roman pounds, for some sort of exchange. The inscription P-III on the gold arm-ring, therefore, must also mean three pounds. The fragmentary arm-ring, however, weighs 41.57g. The excavators have suggested that it might signify the value of the gold – that is, it had the value of three pounds of silver. They estimate that the present part constitutes approximately half the complete arm-ring, which would give a complete weight of *c* 80g. They found literary sources which indicate that the ratio in the fourth century between silver and gold was 1:14.4, which would require 67.5g of gold to 3 lbs of silver at 324g per pound, but with all the uncertainties they hesitate to conclude anything.[25] In Fonnesbech-Sandberg's article on weight systems in the early Germanic Iron Age, however, she mentions that the ratio in the fourth and fifth centuries varied between 1:10 and 1:18. Given that precious metals were rare in the North, she chose to work with a ratio of 1:10.[26] If *c* 80g of gold should be the equivalent of 3lbs of silver, we reach a ratio of 1:12.2, giving perhaps more credit to Henriksen and Horsnæs' suggestion than they did themselves. They suggest that the inscription could have been made by a member of the Germanic nobility, but inside the empire, where it would have made sense. I think that one possibility could be that this Germanic arm-ring was a part of the spoils after the defeat of a Germanic raiding party, and that it received the mark as it was registered in the provincial treasury. Later it would return to *Germania* as payment to a Germanic warlord.

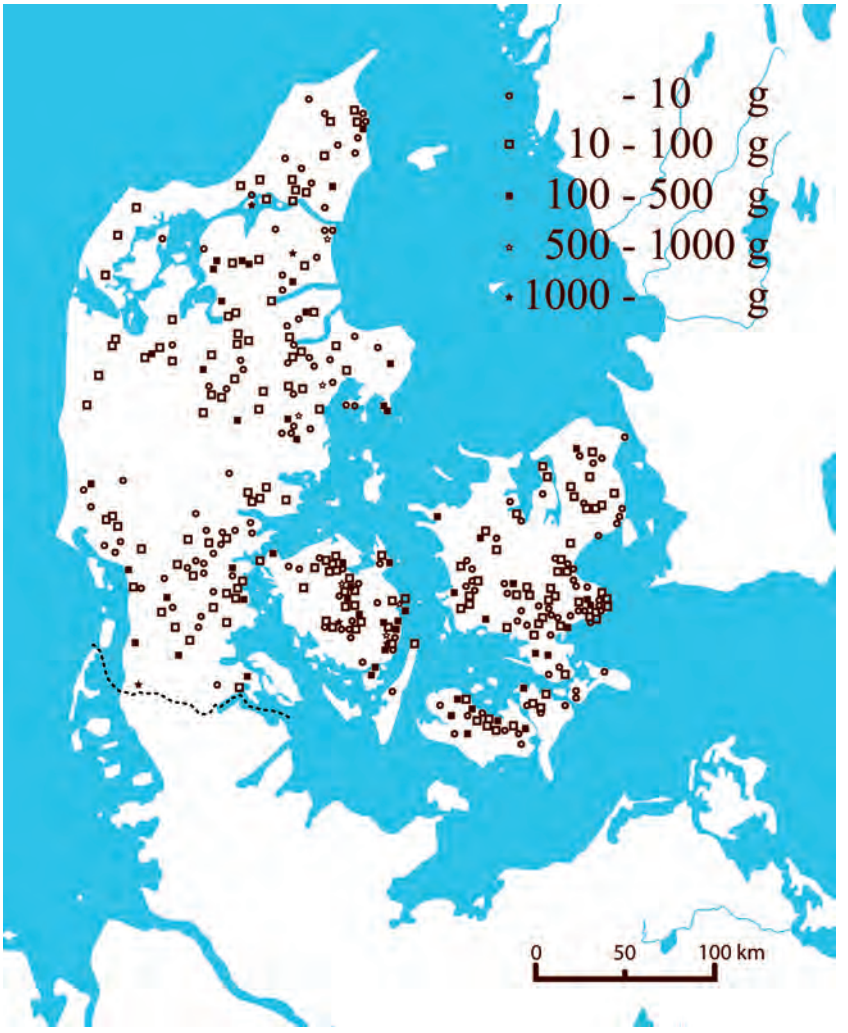

Illustration 22.11
The distribution of gold hoards in Denmark in the early Germanic Iron Age.
After Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1988, fig 1

It is quite possible that diplomatic contacts to the Romans continued for some time after the end of the Roman Iron Age in the end of the fourth century.[27] Following this hypothesis, at the transformation from the Roman Iron Age to the Migration Period we can see some continuity in function, although the rituals and display of wealth do change.

On the other hand, raids should not be excluded as a source of income. Later sources tell tales of violent and terrifying warriors from the Danish regions. Gregory of Tours, for instance, writes about an incident in AD

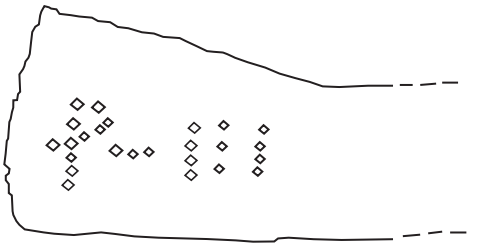

Illustration 22.12
The punched inscription P-III on the fragmented arm-ring
(drawing: Lars Ewald Jensen)

516 when the Frisian and Frankish regions were raided by a Danish king, Hygelac, who was later disposed of by Theodoric and Theodobert. From Gildas and Bede we hear of Hengist and Horsa coming from Jutland to England, but that is another story.

The nature of change

The reasons for the change in customs at the transition between the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period are entirely unclear. It has been suggested that general poverty forced the locals to give up rich burials. Instead, valuables were saved and occasionally put into the ground for some reason or other.[28] However, nothing in the archaeological material from this period would indicate such a regression.[29] Hedeager links the changes to a shift in attitudes. In the Roman Iron Age the custom of depositing wealth, for instance, in the form of jewellery and imported Roman luxury objects in graves reflects social competition between peers in order to establish and consolidate a position of power in society by equating themselves with the gods. At the transition to the Migration Period this ritual is replaced by a focus on bringing gifts to the gods instead, possibly because an elite was now consolidated.[30] This is also reflected in the theory, at least regarding the Himlingøje centre, that the need for massive displays of wealth was no longer present, as the centre was by now firmly established.[31]

A focus on the gods is also reflected in the arguments of Henriksen and Horsnæs, who point towards Norse mythology. From the Icelandic sagas it is known that Odin allowed for the deceased to bring with him to Valhalla whatever riches he had buried when he was alive. This could explain the many silver hoards from the Viking Age. We know of mythological scenes depicted already in the Migration Period on artefacts such as bracteates, but Henriksen and Horsnæs naturally ask whether this religion can be traced all the way back to the late Roman Iron Age. If so, the two hoards from Funen would be the earliest demonstrations of this change.[32] Interestingly, we can find support for Henriksen and Horsnæs' idea in an article by Andrén on Scandinavian religion. He discusses, for instance, the myth of Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life mentioned in the Icelandic sagas. The tree stood with three roots in the centre and was surrounded by nine different worlds. Andrén relates the idea of the tree to different Swedish grave-types. One was marked by a central stone surrounded by a stone circle usually of seven or nine stones. Another example is the ring-fort of *c* AD 200 at Ismantorp on Öland in the Baltic Sea. It contained ninety-five houses filling up all the space within, except for a square in the middle where a large wooden pole had been. A large ring wall was equipped with nine gates. This Andrén sees as an indication that the Norse myths can be traced back 1,200 years in material culture.[33] Furthermore, there is some evidence that Odin was already being depicted as early as the third century AD.[34] Andrén infers a strong influence from the Roman world on the initial shaping of Germanic religion. He refers to Tacitus, who describes the main gods of the Germanic peoples including Odin, although indirectly using the Latin name of Mercury, which is believed to be the equivalent of Woden or Odin. Initially, the worship of Odin may have been inspired by either the cult of the Emperor or the Mithras cult, just as Roman statuettes and coins may have inspired the first depictions of the Germanic gods.[35] Whatever the reason, the consequence was that at the end of the fourth century AD, an old and widespread ritual of supplying the deceased with items for the banquet and well-being in the afterlife had become obsolete in southern Scandinavia; only wealth was needed. In Valhalla, dinner was already served.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] Grane 2007a, 86. Secondary inscriptions under the foot of a pair of silver beakers show the name 'Silius'.
[2] Augustus, *Res Gestae* 26.2.4.
[3] Storgaard 2003, 110–11.
[4] Eggers 1951, 129, 168, map 30.
[5] Hirsch et al 2006, 58, 60.
[6] Two other important groups of finds of Roman origin are coins and swords. They are subject to different conditions, however, as most of the finds derive from hoards and bog deposits respectively, which makes it difficult to include them in the present study.
[7] The word 'import' is used in its most neutral meaning, simply designating an object of a foreign origin.
[8] Näsman 2002, 355–6.
[9] See also Grane 2007b.
[10] Tacitus *Historiae*: 4.12–37, 4.54–79, 5.14–26.
[11] Lund Hansen et al 1995.
[12] Grane 2011.
[13] Lund Hansen 2009.
[14] Almandines: deep purple-red garnets.
[15] Storgaard 2003, 121–3.
[16] Lund Hansen 1987, 214–15.
[17] Henriksen 1992.
[18] Henriksen & Horsnæs 2004; 2006.
[19] Henriksen 1992, 54; Storgaard 1990, 27–30; Werner 1988, 280–1.
[20] Henriksen & Horsnæs 2004, 137–9; 2006, 264–7.
[21] Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1988, 152–3.
[22] See Dyhrfjeld-Johnsen, this volume.
[23] Dexippos *Σκυθικά*: fr. 6.7.
[24] Cahn 1984, 324–6.
[25] Henriksen & Horsnæs 2004, 132–4; 2006, 262–4.
[26] Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1988, 153, n 2.
[27] Storgaard 2003, 119.
[28] Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1988, 139, 153.
[29] Henriksen 2009, 333.
[30] Hedeager 1990, 85–6.
[31] Storgaard 2003, 119.
[32] Henriksen & Horsnæs 2004, 139–44.
[33] Andrén 2006, 264.
[34] Personal communication, C R Seehusen, PhD student, University of Copenhagen.
[35] Tacitus *Germania*: 9.1; Andrén 2006, 265; Perl 1990, 158–9.

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